UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
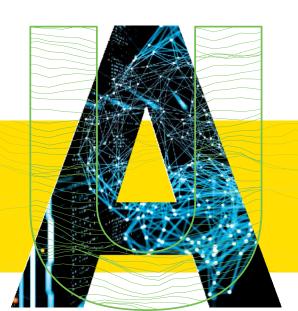
BLACK-LED RESEARCH NETWORK INITIATIVE

WHAT WE HEARD REPORT:
SPACE FOR EXCELLENCE IN BLACK-LED RESEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

This report summarizes the feedback provided by participants regarding the design and use of a campus space to support Black-led research at the University of Alberta. The visioning session was held in HUB 8915 on 15 October 2024. Black researcher members of the Steering Committee of the Black-led Research Network Initiative (BRNI), additional Black faculty members with active research and community engagement activities, and students from the ELITE Program for Black Youth and the BYSI Program were invited to participate. Participants included faculty members, students, and staff. After a brief welcome and stage setting through the lens of the Black-led Research Network Initiative (BRNI) by Dr. André McDonald, participants engaged in a series of persona and empathy-building activities led by Professor Jared Wesley and Mr. Seon Yuzyk, discussing what space is like for Black-led research on campus currently, as well as what it could be in the future. The key themes that emerged from the feedback are detailed below, with a focus on how the space – as one of potentially several – can build capacity for Black-led research at the University of Alberta and lead us to securing external resources for long-term sustainability.

Key Themes and Spatial Suggestions

1. **Prominent, Meaningful Entrance:** The space needs a new awning and window decals to announce to the community the purpose of the space. The display windows should feature artifacts, photos, book covers, conference posters, etc. that feature Black-led research at UAlberta. Entrance must also become barrier free (e.g., with stair lift).
2. **Flexible and Multi-purpose Areas:** The space should be highly adaptable, accommodating both collaborative and individual work. Movable furniture is crucial to allow the space to shift depending on the needs of the moment, whether for formal meetings, informal gatherings, or focused research.
3. **Emotional Support and Comfort:** The design should foster an environment where researchers feel safe, supported, and inspired. This includes the creation of spaces where individuals can relax, reflect, and feel a sense of safety and belonging. Emotional well-being is a key component, with the space serving as a refuge and place of community for Black scholars, including students in the BYSI and ELITE programs and from Campus Saint-Jean.
4. **Incorporation of Art and Culture:** The space should prominently feature artwork that reflects Black culture and history. This not only serves as a source of inspiration but also reinforces the cultural identity of the space. The inclusion of art by Black artists is recommended to create a visually engaging and culturally significant environment.
5. **Technology Digital, and Mechanical Infrastructure:** Participants emphasized the importance of having advanced technological infrastructure, as well as mechanical infrastructure. The space should include:
    - **High-speed internet**: Ensuring fast and reliable connectivity for research, virtual meetings, and data-sharing.
    - **A booking / reservation system**: Providing easy access to book different rooms in the space. Ideally, this would be connected to an online system.
    - **Audiovisual equipment**: Including big-screen televisions with wireless connections for presentations, virtual meetings, and collaborative work. Some should be mounted (e.g., Boardroom), while others might be moveable (e.g., multipurpose space).
    - **Workstations with charging stations**: Ample outlets and charging stations for laptops and other devices should be available throughout the space.

    o **Mechanical and building services**: The space will need appropriately sized space heating and conditioning units to ensure human comfort and remove food odors when it is actively occupied. Plumbing and kitchen services will also be needed to support multi-purpose activities and engagement.

6. **Collaborative spaces**: Incorporating whiteboards and moveable furniture to facilitate teamwork. These should be 'wired,' too, to allow inter-campus collaborations.
7. **Large Boardroom Table:** A large boardroom table should be a focal point of the Boardroom, providing a space for formal discussions, group meetings, and strategic planning sessions. This table should be surrounded by comfortable seating to encourage both collaboration and serious academic work.
8. **Focus and Relaxation Areas:** The space should include plants and comfortable seating areas for informal meetings and relaxation. These areas will help researchers rejuvenate, allowing for both work and downtime within the same environment.
9. **Community Engagement Focus:** The space should serve as a hub for community engagement and connection. In addition to being a research space, it should host events that foster collaboration between scholars, students, and the wider community.
10. **Natural Lighting, Fresh Paint, and Greenery:** The use of natural light and the inclusion of fresh paint and plants will enhance the atmosphere of the room, making it feel vibrant and alive. Lighting plays a crucial role in creating a welcoming and energizing space.

Next Steps

1. **Engage Stakeholders in Design Development**: Convene a meeting of the Steering Committee of the Black-led Research Network Initiative (BRNI) to review these initial findings and refine the space design based on the feedback from the participants in the visioning exercise.
2. **Engage Budget-holders, Procurement and Space Specialists:** Finalize budget and develop a stage-gated plan for re-designing the existing space. This will allow for incremental development of the space and partial use of the space in the near term.
3. **Develop a Detailed, Phased Design Plan**: Work with architects and interior designers to create a detailed design plan that incorporates the themes and recommendations outlined in this report.
4. **Incorporate Art and Cultural Elements**: Begin sourcing artwork from Black artists and planning for the inclusion of cultural elements in the space design.
5. **Monitor Usage and Satisfaction**: After the space is completed, conduct regular surveys to assess how well it meets the needs of its users and make adjustments as necessary.

This report highlights the vision for a space that is both highly functional and deeply personal, designed to foster research excellence, cultural pride, and community connection among Black scholars and researchers at the university. By incorporating these recommendations, the university can create a space that truly supports the growth of Black-led research.